

They Never Told Me

My parents always told me that my body would experience some changes in high school. They never told me about the temporary paralysis. When I first awoke on the deserted baseball diamond, my legs refused to cooperate with my spine. I spent an hour and a half clawing through yards and yards of dust and astroturf. My quivering arms demanded rest, but hunger prodded them into perseverance. Not only did I crave a meal—something rich and full-bodied to thicken my watery blood—I also craved answers.

My parents always told me not to talk to strangers. They never warned me about the silent ones. How could I have let him sneak up on me? What had happened to the cheering crowds? What was the final score of the game? Every few feet, I managed to grab a handful of memory. I saw a glimpse of the stranger emerging from behind the dugout. I relived the fiery prick of a needle to my abdomen. I remembered the moment when I had extracted the object from between my ribs, only to discover the mother of all syringes in my hand. The last drop of clear fluid from the needlepoint had embedded itself in the soil. My limp body had followed suit.

The flashbacks faded as I drew nearer to the school building. I found the back door ripped from its hinges, and I climbed across the threshold. The muscle fibers of my legs writhed beneath the surface. When sensation returned to my lower half, I found myself walking exclusively on tiptoes. The new gait just felt more natural.

My parents always told me that I would eventually need to provide for myself. They never mentioned anything about farm raiding. The school cafeteria's inventory only lasted for

less than a month after the incident, leaving me with no other option. I descended upon a nearby ghost town.

Entire farms disappeared down my gullet. Willard Herschel's prized wheat field became a sacrifice to my appetite. Heads of lettuce dissolved in my mouth. My bite reduced corncocks to a moist pulp. Whole melons disintegrated between my jaws. I left no rind intact.

I eventually needed to expand my horizons when the food supply dried up. On one occasion, I managed to climb atop Powell Ridge and use Willard's binoculars to survey the landscape. (I plan to return them at *some* point.) In my search for untouched crops, I glimpsed one of my own kind among the Fitzpatrick Ranch cattle. The thirtysomething woman buried her face in the flank of a freshly-slaughtered heifer, emerging with chunks of raw steak between her teeth.

She vanished before I could reach her location. I used matchsticks, a fireplace, and a skewer in the Fitzpatrick ranch house to craft beef kabobs from her leftovers. Beginning the next morning, I no longer bothered with fruits and vegetables. By the following week, I no longer bothered with a fire.

My parents always told me that I would bulk up with age. They would always remind me to keep pumping that iron and sipping on that chocolate milk. They never said that my bodyweight would increase by a full third during junior year. Millions of particles from the animals' meat clung to my bones, constructing bundles of taut cables underneath my skin. My silhouette inflated. Lumbering shoulders forced me to hunch. (Mother would *definitely* disapprove of my new posture.)

My parents always told me to stay well-groomed. They never warned me that a stranger's injection would make my appearance unmanageable. A scraggly carpet of brown and silver has

overtaken most of my hide. It's too much of a pain to comb or brush. Now I only shower once or twice a week. I use the locker room showers at school, which became my new home when a band of armed marauders invaded my neighborhood a few days ago.

They never informed me that my fingernails would one day peel off in translucent strips. I spent half a week nail-less before ivory barbs sprouted from my fingertips in their place. Back in the fifth grade, my entire class had once envied Jacob Huff for his bear tooth necklace. (He claimed to have hunted the beast himself.) Now I possess a bear tooth at the end of each digit.

My parents always told me that people would call me names. They never told me that Tommy Buffett Junior would glower at me, hollering "Go back to Hell, ya filthy wolf-man!" while unloading his last shotgun shell into my torso. The ranch hand's shot had rung through the ballpark for a full minute.

Now I lie back at square one—back at home plate. My lupine legs no longer listen to me. Black spots dance in my vision. Tommy is long gone. Maybe he will be back with ammunition and reinforcements. On the other hand, though, I would like to believe that part of him still recognizes me. As I muse, shafts of milky light pierce the charcoal gray cloud cover.

Under the rays of the harvest moon, I feel my wounds beginning to mend. My skin appears to become liquid as new flesh flows into the gashes left by Tommy's gun. My toes begin to twitch. In the same way that the sun radiates Vitamin D during the day, the moonlight now fills my cells with its otherworldly medicine.

The dawn of a new night also refreshes my spirit. Despite the acute torment, I *know* that my troubles will expire before I do. After all, my parents always told me to persevere—even when life no longer makes sense.